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BOOKS AND THE BOOK WORLD

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SECTION SIX

Dr. Egan on "The Strong Hours"

He Cordially Recommends Maud Diver's Novel, Approving of Its Emphasis on Interest in Character, and of Its "Lesson"

MAUD DIVER'S *The Strong Hours* is a serious, sincere, thoughtful and interesting book. The ideal reviewer ought, of course, to judge a book by the intention of the author who writes it; but we who buy books to get pleasure or exaltation from them take a different position. If an author sets out to write a classic it is entirely his own affair if he bores us. The classics are all good; that is admitted; but we are apt to leave them on the shelves. One quality in Maud Diver's novel is that she makes us want to read "classics" which most of us have almost forgotten. For instance, she quotes lines of Swinburne, Stevenson, Emerson and Brown. She also quotes Balzac, his French.

And we begin each chapter in a thoughtful mood. She revives a custom of the older novelists effectively. Scott had a habit of inventing an appropriate "quotation" as a prelude to his chapter; when we read "Old Play" we know, as a rule, that the "old play" existed in Sir Walter's imagination. But Maud Diver adopts the usage in a new way with very delicate art. The lines at the beginning of her chapters are simply preludes to put us in a mood of meditation; but it is not with the intention of the author of *The Strong Hours* that this reviewer concerns himself; it is quite evident that Maud Diver wants us to understand, to love, or to hate certain qualities in her characters, with a view to improving our own, and thus adding to the ethical value of the world.

The Strong Hours is one of the very few modern English novels that one can respect, and at the same time read with interest. It is rather longer than it might be, perhaps. If Maud Diver had not chosen to treat her subject in a very leisurely manner, carefully stretching her canvas and allowing no temptation to divert her from the attempt to make each character live, without needlessly multiplying descriptions, but by intensifying the values of the picture, the novel would have gained in brevity and directness. Yet it would be less an expression of her personality, and consequently less of a work of true art.

II.

If she fails at all, it is in the minor direction of not intensifying certain points in her story for fear of being untrue to nature. For example, a novelist bent on the interest of his story would have so treated Derek Blounts's marriage with Lois as to have to the utmost thrilled every reader, who pays his money for thrills; but Maud Diver tells us of that episode without the faintest touch of what may be called overaccentuation of the human interest. Imagine how appalled we should have been if the child of Lois, by her former lover, the consumptive, shallow, sensuous parasite, had been born; but the author will sacrifice nothing of her method of telling a quiet tale, which depends upon the development of character, for the sake of tensity which would have given us a tremendously dramatic situation.

Maud Diver.

Lois, finely pictured with many reticent touches, each convincing in itself, comes into Derek's life and passes out of it, leaving small trace behind.

Derek, from the author's point of view, is a direct contrast to his brother, Van, whose selfishness is as apparent as his weakness of will and love of comfort; but the unselfishness of Derek's character might have been emphasized without making this very clean minded, frank and fairly typical young Englishman so much of a fool; and (in the episode of Lois) so extremely selfish in his apparent unselfishness. He knows that his marriage is a mere matter of impulse, because Lois who, he is aware, has gone very far in a flirtation with Jos. Agar, is pathetic and clinging. That this marriage would bring wretchedness on his father, Lord Avonleigh, a father somewhat like the younger Duke of Omnium in Trollope's *The Duke's Children*, yet a fine, noble and thoroughly competent father, does not concern him; that he may probably bring diseased children into the world seems to have nothing to do with the case. There is simply no excuse for his action except that the silly Lois threatens suicide, and that he is a fool; as interesting a fool, however, as Touchstone was in the eyes of the melancholy Jaques.

In the war episode, where Derek imitates the famous abnegation of Sir Philip Sidney, we are almost persuaded that his unselfishness is the highest kind of foolishness; but let the reader judge. It is worth his while for him to exercise his judgment on all the characters in *The Strong Hours*—the strong hours being those which tested men's souls during the war; but the war atmosphere is not rubbed in in the way which makes everybody who was at all near the war have a feeling of nausea. Jack—the charming Jack—Derek and Mark do their part in the fighting. Van "slacks." How he managed it we are not quite clear. Gabrielle de Vigne does her part, too. But it is with the effects of the war, with the atmosphere generated by the war in England that Maud Diver's novel concerns itself.

III.

If a man had written this book he could not have been more in love with his heroine than Maud Diver is with Mlle. de Vigne, who is very French, especially in her point of view of marriage. Van is Lord Avonleigh's elder son; Gabrielle is quite aware that she does not love him, but she does not dislike him. He is a very good representative of one of her own class, the heir to a great estate and to a very influential social position. She has her *dot;* she will not go to him empty handed, and therefore she resolves to accept him if he proposes to her.

If Maud Diver had not such a fine perception she would accept the usual English convention that a *mariage de convenance* is always nefarious; but she is too well aware of the values of life and too true to her conclusions from life to give an impression which would be false. In fact, no man—and you find only really charming women in *men's* novels—has ever painted a more attractive personality than that of Gabrielle, and the reader who reads books not because of the artistic intention of the author, but because he wants to enjoy them, will find it entirely worth his while to acquire this volume in order to make the acquaintance of Gabrielle.

There is a plot, of course, but only the characters count; the style is so pure, so exactly expressive that Cardinal Newman, if he had written a modern novel, could not have used the English language with more delicacy and exactness.

Nearly all modern English novelists have a good technique and they know how to give us the "feeling" of English society in all classes most vividly. This "feeling" is translated into every page of this book, and we know that we are living with real English men and English women of a class whose point of view evolution may

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